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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 000946

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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS AND PM
MCC FOR D NASSIRY AND E BURKE

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER PHUM MOPS CE

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: AMBASSADOR PRESSES PRESIDENTIAL
ADVISOR ON CONTINUED POLITICAL REFORMS

REF: A. COLOMBO 927
1B. COLOMBO 899

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr., for reasons 1.4(b,d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: On July 2 Ambassador met with President Rajapaksa's brother and chief political advisor Basil Rajapaksa to discuss the GSL's development plans in the East. Ambassador inquired about ongoing efforts to resettle internally displaced persons (IDPs), the concerns surrounding the creation of a High Security Zone (HSZ) south of Trincomalee, the timing and scope of possible elections in the East, the status of the APRC devolution proposals and the GSL's continued efforts on human rights. Rajapaksa detailed the progress made in resettling approximately 93,000 IDPs in the East and explained the GSL's efforts to correct some missteps in the creation of the HSZ by limiting the size of the militarily-restricted area. With regard to elections in the East, Rajapaksa stated that any elections held in the East likely would not occur for at least two months and would only involve officials at the municipal level. He re-committed the GSL to the APRC objective of finding a workable devolution proposal and also provided a progress report on the Government's efforts to arrest those responsible for conducting abductions for ransom. Ambassador congratulated Rajapaksa on the GSL's recent efforts to halt abductions for ransom and pressed him to work towards eliminating all abductions. END SUMMARY.

PROGRESS ON RESETTLING IDPs, BUT CONCERNS REMAIN

12. (C) On July 2 Ambassador met Chief Presidential Advisor Basil Rajapaksa who recently returned to Sri Lanka after an extended trip abroad, including to the United States. Ambassador briefed Rajapaksa on his recent trip to the East and commended the GSL on its efforts to resettle IDPs

previously displaced by fighting between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lanka military (ref A). Ambassador explained that there are some remaining concerns about the IDPs' welfare. IDPs are still worried that fighting will resume, causing them to be displaced again. Ambassador encouraged Rajapaksa to ensure that Eastern military commanders understand the Ministry of Defense's (MoD) recent order to allow non-governmental organizations (NGOs) back into previously banned areas. Rajapaksa agreed that there was some confusion, noting that the GSL does not want NGOs operating in the East without any Government oversight. However, Rajapaksa assured Ambassador that the GSL welcomes NGO help in the East and was working to ensure that the MoD's order was understood and followed by military commanders.

¶3. (C) Ambassador told Rajapaksa that IDPs were also concerned that the GSL would stop providing assistance to them now that they have been resettled. Many have not had an opportunity to plant crops and cannot sustain themselves without continued GSL intervention. Rajapaksa assured Ambassador that the GSL's commitment to aiding IDPs has not waned, noting that the GSL recently eased restrictions on fishing in the East further than any previous administration since the conflict began. Stating that the GSL has resettled approximately 93,000 IDPs thus far, Rajapaksa noted that the primary obstacle to further resettlement is the need to de-mine previously held Tiger territory, and requested USG assistance. Ambassador asked Rajapaksa to present a formal request to the Embassy for assistance with humanitarian de-mining, including information on the current de-mining efforts by the GSL and others, and promised to look into

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whether the USG can help expedite the GSL's de-mining efforts in the East.

GSL BACKTRACKS ON SCOPE OF HIGH SECURITY ZONE

¶4. (C) Shifting to public concerns about the GSL's efforts to create a High Security Zone in Trincomalee, Ambassador recounted his conversation with Defense Secretary Gothabaya Rajapaksa, in which Gothabaya said that the size of the militarily-restricted portion of the HSZ would be much smaller than the area formally announced in the Government gazette. Basil Rajapaksa acknowledged that there has been some confusion even within the Government about the size of the HSZ and the limitations that would be placed on residents there. The GSL has revised its plan and is attempting to withdraw its original gazetted plan for the HSZ, which cordoned off a much larger swath of land in Sampur and Muttur East than the GSL currently intends to restrict. Rajapaksa also noted that the GSL is prepared to deal with fundamental rights petitions filed by IDPs claiming to be unable to return to their original residences by using satellite imagery to prove where residents lived prior to evacuating their homes. Ambassador urged the GSL to make a public statement on its plans with respect to the HSZ to reassure the public.

CONFUSION ABOUT ELECTIONS IN THE EAST

¶5. (C) Ambassador asked Rajapaksa about the GSL's announcement that it plans to hold elections in the East, noting that there is some confusion about the timing and the scope of the elections. Ambassador also noted USG concerns that: 1) the GSL had failed to restore law and order and rein in paramilitaries, thereby making a free and fair election very difficult; and 2) the importance of not pre-empting decisions on elections in the APRC. Rajapaksa explained some of the procedural hurdles the GSL must overcome to call for elections in the East and said that they were not likely to occur before September or October of 2007. With respect to the scope of the election, Rajapaksa told Ambassador that it

would only be for municipal leaders and would not involve either district or provincial representatives -- the units of devolution that are being considered in the various All Parties Representative Committee (APRC) proposals. Rajapaksa noted that the provincial elections were extremely important and that the GSL was not ready to call for elections at that level because there was too great a chance that the administration's representatives could lose.

¶6. (C) Rajapaksa stated the GSL intends to expand the number of people eligible to run for election by re-opening the nomination process. Presumably, this would open the door for new parties in the East to run in municipal elections, including the Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal (TMVP or Karuna faction). Rajapaksa stated the GSL is adamant about ensuring that no one will be able to criticize the elections as anything other than free and fair. In order to ensure that the election results cannot be criticized, he stated, all IDPs must be resettled so that they are able to vote in their home districts. Ambassador noted that accomplishing this objective will depend, in part, on the cessation of fighting in Thoppigala and asked Rajapaksa when the military believes it will be able to declare victory over the Tigers there. Rajapaksa said that internal MoD projections estimate that the LTTE will finally lose its Thoppigala stronghold between July 16 and July 25, but cautioned that the GSL has been wrong about these estimates in the past.

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¶7. (C) Ambassador said that observers are concerned about the Karuna faction as a potential impediment to peaceful elections in the East. Rajapaksa disagreed, arguing that "Karuna has helped liberate the Tamils" and that he "looks after Tamils' interests to protect them from Muslim aggression." Ambassador noted that if Karuna is interested in participating in the political process, then he may have a role to play as spokesman for his constituents, but he should not be allowed to act in a paramilitary capacity. Rajapaksa assured Ambassador that Karuna's military might was limited in all places where the GSL had defeated the Tigers, noting that although Karuna cadres are still visible in Trincomalee, they no longer openly carry weapons with them. Ambassador pressed Rajapaksa to do more to ensure that Karuna's involvement is limited to a legitimate political role and not as a paramilitary commander.

RAJAPAKSA ENDORSES APRC PROCESS

¶8. (C) Ambassador noted that critics have expressed concerns that the administration is weakening the All Parties Representative Committee's (APRC) efforts to create a workable devolution plan. Rajapaksa assured Ambassador that the GSL fully intends to move forward with the APRC devolution process. Rajapaksa felt the best way to do this was to identify and discuss issues that can be resolved at the Parliament level, but limit discussion on issues that require either a constitutional change or a national referendum. Otherwise, the devolution process would become hopelessly mired in meaningless debate. Ambassador pressed Rajapaksa to work in tandem with the APRC process, regardless of what procedural mechanism the Government ultimately uses to get popular approval for whatever APRC decides.

AMBASSADOR WELCOMES HUMAN RIGHTS ARRESTS

¶9. (C) Ambassador commended Rajapaksa on the recent arrest of N. Gajanayake, widely suspected to be the leader of an abduction-for-ransom operation, as well as five other suspects believed to be associated with him (ref B). Rajapaksa said there are abductions for political purposes and abductions for ransom, noting that the GSL can control political abductions but that abductions for ransom are extremely difficult to stop. Ambassador noted that at the

recent Co-Chairs meeting in Oslo the participants agreed that Sri Lanka's goal should be to eliminate all abductions, not just those involving abductions for ransom. Ambassador pressed Rajapaksa to take these matters seriously, noting that the international community expects to see continued progress towards the elimination of abductions in Sri Lanka.

¶110. (C) COMMENT: Rajapaksa's candid assessment of both the administration's progress and its continued weaknesses indicates an intent on the part of the administration to listen to the international community and make concessions where it feels it is politically feasible to do so. Some mistakes, such as designating too large an area as part of the Trincomalee High Security Zone, seem to be the result of carelessness or lack of communication within the Government. Recent efforts, such as the resettlement of IDPs and arrests of extortionists, seem focused on producing substantive reform and tangible results. But much more progress is needed.

BLAKE